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ABSTRACT

This study examined one of the fundamental questions in humanistic and transpersonal psychology: what kind of relationship exists between transcendent experience and personal psychological well-being? College undergraduates (N=92) at three colleges were asked to recall their "most wonderful" experience, and then to complete an adaptation of Hood's M Scale to assess the presence of mystical or transcendent aspects of this experience. Participants also completed an adaptation of Heath's Perceived Self Questionnaire to assess personal maturity. Correlational analysis revealed that, generally, the higher the degree of mystical qualities in the participant's experiences, the lower the degree of maturity; however, the opposite pattern was noted for experiences which involved noetic qualities, where the individual felt that she or he had gained valid knowledge through some kind of insight. Noetically weighted experiences are associated with a higher degree of maturity in this college-age group. These data suggest the need for a developmental approach to the study of transcendent experience. (LLL)

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How Are Transpersonal Experience and Personal Maturity Related?

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How Are Transpersonal Experience and Personal Maturity Related?

Abstract

This study addressed the question: "What kind of relationship exists between transcendent experience and personal maturity?" Ninety-two college undergraduates at three colleges were asked to recall their "most wonderful" experience, and then to complete an adaptation of Hood's M Scale to assess the presence of mystical or transcendent aspects of this experience. Participants also completed an adaptation of Heath's Perceived Self Questionnaire to assess personal maturity. Correlational analysis revealed that, generally, the higher the degree of mystical qualities in the participants's experiences, the lower the degree of maturity; however, the opposite pattern was noted for experiences which involved noetic qualities, where the individual felt that she or he had gained valid knowledge through some kind of insight. These data suggest the need for a developmental approach to the study of transcendent experience.

How Are Transpersonal Experience and Personal Maturity Related?

One of the fundamental questions in humanistic and transpersonal psychology is, what kind of relationship exists between transcendent experience and personal psychological well-being?

One point of view has it that so-called "transcendent" experiences are actually instances of regression, pernicious irrationality, or brief psychosis. This is the position of classical Freudian psychoanalysis (Fauteux, 1987; Freud, 1961a, 1961b), and in our times it shows up in the thought of Albert Ellis (Ellis, 1986, 1989; Ellis & Yeager, 1989), Rollo May (1986a, 1986b), and the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (1976).

A very different position maintains that transcendent experiences not only encourage and exemplify healthy development, but that such experiences are *necessary* for proper human growth. This is the viewpoint found in the work of Carl Jung(1943/1966), Abraham Maslow (1969, 1970), and others (Newton & Caple, 1985) interested in what has come to be called "transpersonal psychology" (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980, 1987).

To a large extent, the debate between these viewpoints has been characterized by name-calling and rhetoric, anecdote and partisan post-hoc explanation, rather than by research. In my study, I attempted to look empirically at the relationship between

transcendent experiences and psychological well-being. As you will see, my data suggest that matters are a bit more intricate than I expected they would be.

Methods

Models and Instruments

I used Douglas Heath's (1977) model of the "maturity" concept to represent psychological well-being. In Heath's model, "maturity" is a developmental concept where the individual is described in terms of four principal sectors: Cognitive Skills, Self Concept, Values, and Personal Relationships. Each of these sectors of functioning, in turn, can be described in terms of five dimensions of maturity: (1) Symbolization, or the degree to which the person can represent experience; (2) Allocentrism, or the degree to which the person can take alternative points of view; (3) Integration, or the degree to which the person's functioning coheres into a consistent order; (4) Stability, which refers to the enduring quality of a style of functioning; and, (5) Autonomy, which indicates the self-regulatory quality of a person's functioning.

As a functional measure of the maturity construct, I altered one of Heath's (1968) measures, the Perceived Self Questionnaire. The instrument which I used consisted of a Likert scale used to respond to fifty first-person statements, such as, "I usually know what other people think of me," which refers to allocentrism of the self concept.

As a model of transcendent experience, I used Ralph Hood's (1975) model of mysticism, which owes much to the thought of Stace (1960) and Maslow (1968). In Hood's formulation, there are eight dimensions of mystical experience. Different experiences will reflect these eight dimensions to different degrees.

These eight dimensions are:

(1) *The Ego Quality.* This refers to the experience of a loss of sense of self, while consciousness is nevertheless maintained.

(2) *The Unifying Quality.* This refers to the experience of a multiplicity of objects of perception as being nevertheless united into one.

(3)*The Inner Subjective Quality.* This refers to the perception that subjectivity or consciousness exists in things which we usually consider to lack these characteristics, such as a tree, a rock, or the universe as a whole.

(4) *The Temporal/Spatial Quality.* In the extreme, this refers to an experience which seems to be both "timeless" and "spaceless."

(5) *The Noetic Quality.* This refers to the experience as a source of valid knowledge. The emphasis here is on an insight that is intuitive, but not merely subjective.

(6) *Ineffability.* This refers to the impossibility of putting the experience into conventional language.

(7)*The Positive Affect Quality.* Typically, the experience is one of joy or blissful happiness.

(8) *The Religious Quality.* This refers to the perception of an intrinsic sacredness to the experience.

As a functional measure of the transcendent experience construct, I altered Hood's M Scale (Hood, 1975). I first gave each participant a cognitive task similar to that which Maslow gave to his participants:

> Think of the most wonderful experience of your life: a happiest moment, an ecstatic moment, a moment of rapture. Absolutely any type of experience is acceptable. Please think about this experience for a moment or two before continuing. (Cf. Maslow, 1968, p. 71.)

I then asked each participant to write a description of the experience, and then to respond to the altered M Scale. As altered, this scale consisted of a Likert scale used to respond to 32 statements about this "most wonderful experience." For example: "I had an experience in which everything seemed to disappear from my mind until I was conscious only of a void." This statement refers to the Ego Quality.

Participants

Participants in this study were undergraduate college students at Haverford College, Bryn Mawr College, and Brigham young University. Approximately 33% of those who received my instruments in the mail responded, for a total of 92 participants.

Statistical Analysis

The question of interest here is essentially one of relationship or association; that is, are transcendent experiences positively or negatively related to personal maturity? Thus, it was reasonable in this preliminary study to analyze the data in terms of a correlational matrix. Thus, I looked at how the eight dimensions of mystical experience correlated with the four sectors and five dimensions of the Heath model.

Results

Insert Table 1 around here.

Twenty-two of the 72 correlations in the matrix were statistically significant at the .06 level (see Table 1). Of these, only 3 were positive. In other words, were one could see a relationship at all, the more a person's "most wonderful experience" resembled the classical mystical experience, the less mature that person was. However, inspection of further details reveals a more intricate relationship in the data.

Of the 3 positive significant correlations, 2 involved the Noetic Quality of the transcendent experience. In fact, if we look at trend data, an interesting pattern emerges.

Insert Table 2 around here.

To see this trend, let us consider just the direction, positive or negative, of the 44 correlations which are significant at the .20 level or better (see Table 2). Of these, six involve the Noetic Quality, and all of these are positive. Only 4 of the other correlations are positive.

These data suggest that all transcendent experiences are not created equal, regarding their relationship with maturity. The pattern-breaking experiences are those which involve a strong noetic component—that is, experiences in which people feel that they have learned something valid about reality. Experiences with a stronger noetic component seem to be associated with a higher degree of maturity. Experiences which emphasize ego dissolution, inner subjectivity, and so forth, without also emphasizing a noetic component, seem to be associated with a lower degree of maturity. (Items from Hood's M Scale dealing with the Noetic Quality are reproduced in the Appendix.)

Discussion

What are we to make of all of this? Is it the case that the classical psychoanalytic view is accurate after all? But then, what do we make of the anomaly of the Noetic Quality? And what do we make of the voluminous anecdotal and clinical literature which

strongly suggests that openness to transcendent experience is associated with higher maturity?

These data are more interpretable and understandable, the more that we adopt a developmental perspective. Keep in mind that my sample was composed of college undergraduates. These are individuals who, for the most part, are involved in the Early Adult Transition, a relatively early stage of adult development (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). To a large extent, these individuals are still staking out their own ego territory. One is reminded in this respect of an old aphorism in transpersonal psychology: "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody." In other words, so the thought goes, people need to have a fairly well-developed ego structure before they can benefit from transcendence of the ego.

For my sample, then, this suggests that transcendent experiences which emphasize transcendence of ego boundaries, and a radically different experience of reality than the one which is conventional in our society, are probably not associated with mature development for late adolescents. I realize that these are correlational data from which it is impossible to draw valid causal conclusions. However, one possibility suggested by these data is that it may be harmful for American youth, without some kind of meaning-giving framework, to engage in activities which strongly emphasize ego transcendence.

At the same time, there is a sense in these data that certain kinds of transcendent experiences are associated with a higher degree of maturity in this age group. Noetically-weighted experiences, which present the individual with a sense that "I have *learned* something *real* here," even if that intuitive something is at odds with consensual reality, present themselves as something apart from other transcendent experiences. Perhaps it is the case that, for people in this age group, noetically-weighted experiences may even spur mature development.

To go farther, I must wonder if these data do not suggest some sort of hierarchy of transcendent experiences. That is, at different stages of the life cycle, different types of transcendent experiences may be most growth-enhancing for the individual. Certainly this is suggested in the developmental theories of the noted transpersonalists Ken Wilber (1980, 1986) and Michael Washburn (1988, 1990).

For example, we may well find that *after* the individual has developed a strong sense of ego identity, experiences which emphasize the Ego Quality might enhance mature development for the adult. (Note that this quality might better be termed the Ego *Death* Quality.) There is really a lifetime of research here for interested investigators, and I invite the audience to participate with me in a rigorous investigation of the question, "What transcendent experiences are associated with mature development at which

stages of the life span?" This is how my research has forced me to recast my original question.

At this convention, the beginning of the Centennial observance of APA, it behooves us to consider some historical observations. Over the course of the first century of organized psychology in the United States, we have learned to take a developmental approach to cognition, psychosexuality, moral thinking, and even the functioning of organizations. I hope that data like those reported in this paper will encourage researchers to consider the developmental aspects of transcendent experience, and that by the Bicentennial celebration of APA in 2091, all of this will seem old hat. I would suggest to future researchers that they particularly consider the developmental implications of the theories of Maslow, Ken Wilber, Michael Washburn, and the "traditional" contemplative psychologies (e.g., Hinduism and Buddhism in the East and alchemy in the West).

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Appendix

Items from Hood's (1975) M Scale regarding the Noetic Quality

13. I had an experience in which a new view of reality was revealed to me.
16. I did not experience anything that I could call ultimate reality.
17. I had an experience in which ultimate reality was revealed to me.
26. I did not have an experience in which deeper aspects of reality were revealed to me.

(Note: Items 16 and 26 are reverse scored for the presence of the Noetic Quality.)

Author Notes

The research presented in this study was originally carried out at the Department of Psychology, Haverford College. The author is now affiliated with the Department of Applied Psychology, New York University. The author is grateful for the mentorship of Douglas Heath, Ph.D., during this research, as well as the guidance of Sidney I. Perloe, Ph.D., and Douglas Davis, Ph.D. The author appreciates the help of Gary Browning, Christopher Colman, Margaret Lee Franklin, and Patricia Wallace Koltko in carrying out this research.

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Table 1

Correlational Matrix, Measures of Transcendence and Maturity

	Ego Quality	Unifying Quality	Inner Subjective	Temporal/ Spatial	Noetic Quality	Ineffability	Positive Affect	Religious Quality
Cognitive Skills	r = -.29 p = .02	n.s	n.s	n.s	n.s	r = -.31 p = .016	n.s.	n.s.
Values	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	r = +.24 p = .055	n.s.	n.s.	ns.
Self Concept	r = -.37 p = .005	r = -.24 p = .048	r = -.27 p = .03	n.s.	n.s.	r = -.37 p = .005	n.s.	n.s.
Personal Relations	n.s.	r = -.29 p = .03	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	r = -.23 p = .06	n.s.	n.s.
Stability	r = -.41 p = .002	r = -.37 p = .005	r = -.36 p = .007	r = -.33 p = .01	n.s.	r = -.29 p = .02	n.s.	n.s.
Integration	r = -.27 p = .03	r = -.24 p = .053	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	r = -.40 p = .003	n.s.	n.s.
Allocentrism	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Autonomy	n.s.	r = -.28 p = .03	r = -.26 p = .04	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Symbolization	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	r = +.35 p = .008	r = -.32 p = .02	n.s.	r = +.24 p = .056

Note: Data are reported for the combined Haverford and Bryn Mawr samples (n = 50); data for the Brigham Young University sample and the total Haverford/Bryn Mawr/Brigham Young sample are essentially the same.

Table 2

Directions of Correlations (p< .20), Measures of Transcendence and Maturity

	Ego Quality	Unifying Quality	Inner Subjective	Temporal/ Spatial	Noetic Quality	Ineffability	Positive Affect	Religious Quality
Cognitive Skills	-			-	+	-	-	
Values	-	-			+	-		+
Self Concept	-	-	-	-		-		
Personal Relations	-	-	-		+	-		
Stability	-	-	-	-		-	-	-
Integration	-	-	-	-		-		
Allocentrism				+	+		+	
Autonomy	-	-	-		+	-		
Symbolization	-				+	-		+

Note: Data are reported for the combined Haverford and Bryn Mawr samples (n = 50); data for the Brigham Young University sample and the total Haverford/Bryn Mawr/Brigham Young sample are essentially the same.